Step-by-Step Xeriscape

A well-planned xeriscape can be colorful and beautiful while conserving water and saving you time, energy, and money. Proper plant selection and efficient irrigation practices are the key. You need not rip out your existing lawn and garden and start all over. Xeriscape can be a gradual process with relatively inexpensive, weekend-manageable projects.

Consider plants that are attractive, noninvasive, and relatively easy to grow. There are a lot of books and websites out there, and if you don't find what you need, ask the nursery or landscape experts. Find out the sun/shade requirements, cost, maintenance needs, and water requirements of the plants you're considering. Ask also about flower color and blooming time, leaf color and shape.

To conserve water, choose plants that can tolerate drought after they are established. All plants require regular watering until their roots are established. For perennials, this means that they will need water on a regular basis at least during their first growing season. Trees and shrubs may require regular irrigation for up to three years after transplanting. The amount of water that you will need to apply will also depend on your climate, soil type, and sun exposure. It is affected by cultural practices, including how you water your plants, whether or not you use mulch, and where windbreaks such as fences, walls, and other vegetation, are located.

Some Suggestions To Help You Get Started

Improve water-holding capacity of the soil by mixing in coarse materials such as compost and barnyard manures.

Eliminate weeds to prevent them from competing with your desirable plants for water and nutrients.

Use mulches between shrubs, flowers and in the vegetable garden to conserve moisture. Wood chips or bark chunks, used without plastic or fabric, make a good mulch. These decorative materials allow air and water penetration, yet keep the soil cool. Heavier bark chunks are best in strong wind areas. Apply these mulches at least four inches deep to conserve water, as well as to discourage moisture loss and weeds. Over a period of time, materials closest to the soil will begin to break down to improve the soil. Add new chips after a few years.

Rock or stone mulches stay in place more effectively in windy areas but absorb more heat and may scorch root or leaves of heat sensitive plants. Avoid large areas of gravel and plastic. While rock-covered areas may reduce water needs, they also increase heat radiation and result in wasteful surface run-off of natural rainfall. Black plastic under shrubs and trees creates oxygen starvation, causing these plants to develop shallow roots just beneath the plastic. Quality landscape fabric should be strong, breathable, and allow water to flow through it. It may not be practical in windy areas.

Group flowers and other plants so the yard is organized into different water use zones. Grouping or "zoning" plants with similar water requirements allows you to meet their high, medium, or low-water needs so some plants in the group are not overwatered while others are underwatered.

Before you water, dig down and find out if the soil is dry. Don't gauge water needs on soil surface appearance.

Check your sprinkler system and get the most out of every gallon of water that you apply to your landscape:

- Adjust sprinkler heads to point water where it is needed. In some cases, a different type of head may be in order. Most sprinkler systems are designed to water a lawn, but often they overlap and irrigate shrubs, trees and flower gardens that need less frequent watering. You may need to change entire portions of your sprinkler system to gain control over location and frequency of watering.

- North exposure lawns do not need as much water as south or west exposures. Change your sprinkler system to occasionally skip waterings on north exposures, and to provide more water to sunny areas.

- Adjust your automatic system's controller throughout the season based on plant watering needs (i.e. less water in the spring and fall). Install a rain shut-off device if your system does not already have one.

- Most systems sprinkle in a circle or semi-circle pattern. Change your lawn to fit the sprinklers. Do away with corners that often are skipped. In place of lawn, consider ground covers that, once established, require little or no water. Creeping junipers, sedums and the old-fashioned hen-n-chicks do the job well.

- Research an inexpensive, labor saving drip or soaker water system for non-turf areas.

A healthy lawn uses less water and is more drought tolerant.

- Deep water your lawn to 6 inches. Deeper roots are less affected by the heat of summer.

- Apply a minimum amount of organic fertilizer to your turf to avoid additional water use and increased mowing as a result of too much nitrogen. The most important time to fertilize your lawn is in late fall around Halloween using a low nitrogen fertilizer.

- Mow your lawn to a height of 2-3 inches. Grass cut to this height helps shade and cool the soil so that less water is required and fewer weeds will germinate.

- Routinely de-thatch and aerate turf to assist water, nutrients, and oxygen in getting to the root zone. Thatch should not exceed ½ inch.

Reduce irrigated turfgrass areas especially on steep slopes, south and west exposures and narrow parking strips.

- Remove turf from narrow, hard-to-water strips and replace it with pretty, drought-tolerant plants.

- Remove turf from between and behind shrubs; replace it with mulch.

- Remove a few feet of the grass along the driveway and sidewalk. Plant these areas with non-thirsty ground cover plants, small shrubs or perennial flowers. This allows these buffer areas to

soak up water from lawn watering that normally would fall on the pavement and run off into the street.

- Replace lawn on steep slopes with a rock garden, tiered wall, or low-spreading evergreens. As with pavement buffer plantings, the water that runs down the slope from other parts of the yard will be captured by these plants.

Here's an easy way to convert a lawn to other ground covers:

1. Outline the desired area with a flexible hose or rope.
2. Use glyphosate (Roundup, Kleenup) to kill the grass in the area you wish to convert. Allow seven days for the grass to turn off-color. Plant low water requiring ground covers and spaced them according to the type and size used. The glyphosate will not injure these new plants. Creeping junipers are ideal because they give year-around cover and tolerate drought well.
3. Leave dead grass between plants. Cover with a four-inch mulch of woodchips. The dead grass helps reduce erosion, especially on slopes. It also provides temporary anchor for the wood chips.
4. To ensure long-range weed control, install breathable fabric available in garden centers. Add enough mulch to hide the fabric. Don't use black plastic. It smothers roots and increases water run-off.
5. If you have an underground sprinkler system, install inexpensive shut-off valves in the line that enters the converted area. Leave sprinkler heads in place. This will allow you to water the new plants as needed, but gradually "wean" them to little or no supplemental water.

Some helpful internet links:

http://www.wsu.edu/~lohr/wcl/

http://www.spokane-county.wsu.edu/spokane/eastside/Sustainable%20Landscaping/Sustainable%20Landscaping.htm

http://www.coopext.colostate.edu/4dmg/Xeris/xeris1.htm

Source: Washington State University Extension, Oregon State University Extension, Colorado State University Extension

Walla Walla County Master Gardeners, WSU Extension, 328 W. Poplar, Walla Walla, WA 99362, 509-524-2685

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